



THE POWER OF PLACE IN ART AND LITERATURE

Inscription in William Dunlap's copy of *Lanterns on the Levee*: "... with thanks and gratitude at a thought that a writer may have been of some use to painter, whom all writers secretly envy."

—Walker Percy, Covington, Louisiana, May 13, 1974

The one constant in American art and life is the land. In an agrarian society, as was ours until World War II, the land and man were one. Property was all that mattered. While human chattel (until 1865) was of considerable value on the bankers' books, it was always going to end. Intellectual property as we know it was little understood. We are left with nothing but the ground on which we stand. Some actually thought it possible to own the land when in fact it is the land that owns us. We are destined to end up in it, "6 feet under" they say. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we're going to win if the ball don't bust," the cheerleaders assure us.

Buy, sell, trade, inherit, or lose it in a card game, it matters not. "They ain't making no more land," except maybe in Hawaii where volcano lovers watch lava pour into the sea and solidify. But then one can always make Art about it, and we have since our predecessors dwelled in caves. This obsession with the land shows up in poetry, prophecy, and painting, and that's not likely to change. The exhibition of photographs and paintings that accompany this symposium evidences the fact that the landscape can be seen and referenced in a variety of ways. They all evoke that timeless sense of place, which is necessary when we consider our origins in this world and the next.

As land became real estate, it also morphed into "landscape." We romanticized (think Hudson River School, Thomas Cole, Church and Bierstadt) and abstracted it (think Willem de Kooning's *Door to the River*, 1960, Franz Kline's bold black and white paintings that echo the New York skyline, and Jackson Pollock who worked on the ground like the Indian sand painters of his native West).

I recently spent time in an exhibition of the nineteenth-century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who is best known for his landscapes. The exhibition entitled *Women*, at Washington's National Gallery of Art, was blisteringly beautiful. The timeless male gaze is on full display here. The female form, whether clothed or nude, prominently occupies the middle ground of each painting. Behind the subject, if you can drag your eyes away from the gloriously illuminated figures, is the most remarkable landscape. The viewer wandering the various galleries thus attuned sees the landscapes as ubiquitous, self-evident, even in paintings where they do not have the pride of place. I encourage you to do that: ferret out the landscape in paintings large and small, old and new.

While meditating on Art and the Land and how they complement one another, we should think about *Meditations on the Origins of Agriculture in America*, the acquisition at the University of Mississippi Museum that brought about this symposium and exhibition. I am fascinated by objects that transcend their original purpose. Agricultural buildings, such as cotton gins now defunct, are often repurposed for storage. Andy Warhol famously elevated Brillo boxes onto sculpture stands, while Robert Rauschenberg turned his bed into a seminal work that now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art. Any work of art is more than the sum of its parts, and it might be useful to look at some of the elements in *Meditations on the Origins of Agriculture in America*.

The most radical thing I did was to take a tabletop that had outlived its usefulness and attach it to the studio wall. Then I waited for something to happen, and it did. There is a butcher knife emerging from the center of the painting, a reference to the critical art speak that coined the phrase “to violate the picture plane.” To the right is a loosely painted nude male figure with arrows protruding from various parts of his body. This is an obvious artistic reference to the historical Saint Sebastian (I have made a life-size version of this haunting image), but the figure is in fact drawn from a carte de visite photograph by Dr. William Bell of Sergeant Wylliams, late of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry, killed in 1867 by the Cheyenne on the plains of Kansas. Located in the lower right are postage stamps beside a brass p. o. box retrieved in the late 1960s from the previous post office building that was demolished in preparation for construction of a new building on the University of Mississippi campus. I surmise that this is one of the boxes William Faulkner failed to fill with mail when he worked there as postmaster (he was too busy playing cards with friends and writing poetry for his first book, *The Marble Faun*) and was summarily fired, about which he said, “I reckon I’ll be at the beck and call of folks with money all my life, but thank God I won’t ever again be at the beck and call of every son of a bitch who’s got two cents to buy a stamp.” Good advice for us all.

That this mailbox came from Ole Miss is significant, as is the presence of the rebel flag creeping out from under the corner of an unfinished snowbound landscape. This object was picked up after a football game in the late 1970s when such flags were passed out in the student section to be waved vigorously at the slightest positive activity on the field. When retrieved, this flag was on the ground, covered with mud and some unidentifiable liquid. It had been discarded and trampled on, thereby transcending its original purpose. It became part of the postgame detritus left for the trash collectors or, as fate would have it, this artist.

The flag’s presence should be obvious, for it is impossible to think of the origins of agriculture in America without coming to grips with this symbol and what it has come to mean. Of equal importance is the forcible removal of the American Indians referenced by the image of Sergeant Wylliams, “Saint Sebastian of the Plains” as he has been called. The 1830’s Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek opened the rich bottomlands of north central Mississippi to my ancestors who came here and stayed. Lacking the gumption or outstanding warrants for their arrest, they did not move west to the Delta, or Texas and Oklahoma for that matter. The handmade rake, the piece of firewood with the pulley grown over, the drips and splatters, the snakeskin are all significant in their own way and they come together inside the frame to speak honestly about the origins of agriculture in America. This is something I would hope we remember and meditate on from time to time.

Institutional memory, or the lack thereof, is of great concern to me and should be to us all. That the University of Mississippi is the recipient, owner, and caretaker in perpetuity of this work of art is an irony that should not be lost. If it weren’t for Ole Miss, *Meditations on the Origins of Agriculture in America* would never have been made.

William Dunlap
McLean, Virginia

MEDITATIONS *on the* LANDSCAPE IN ART *and* LITERATURE

EXHIBITION

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM

MARCH 25–JULY 27, 2019

Opening Reception:

March 25, 2019, 4:00–5:45 p.m.

JOHN ALEXANDER • WALTER ANDERSON • JASON BOULDIN • MARSHALL BOULDIN
ANDREW BLANCHARD • CHARLIE BUCKLEY • JANE RULE BURDINE • LINDA BURGESS
WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY • LANGDON CLAY • MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY • ED CROOM
WARREN DENNIS • WILLIAM DUNLAP • WILLIAM EGGLESTON • WILLIAM FERRIS
HUGER FOOTE • MICHAEL FORD • GILBERT GAUL • ROLLAND GOLDEN
WILLIAM GOODMAN • THEORA HAMBLETT • WILLIAM HOLLINGSWORTH • MARIE HULL
O.W. PAPPY KITCHENS • JACK KOTZ • TERRY LYNN • JOHN MCCRADY • ROBERT MALONE
SALLY MANN • MILLY WEST • TOM RANKIN • R. KIM RUSHING • JACK SPENCER
GLENNRAY TUTOR • WYATT WATERS • EUDORA WELTY • BROOKE WHITE • CARLYLE WOLFE

Image on front: *Meditations on the Origins of Agriculture in America*, 1987, by William Dunlap.



The acquisition of William Dunlap's artwork was supported in part by funding from the Mississippi Arts Commission, through the Avery B. Dille Jr. Fund for Art Acquisition, in memory of Mr. Avery B. Dille Sr., Mrs. Katherine T. Dille, and Avery B. Dille Jr. Friends of the Museum and the artist contributed to the acquisition. Friends of the Museum is sponsoring the exhibition, symposium, and related activities. Funding partially provided by the National Park Service.